THE CHURCH OF ABBEY DORE

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Introduction

THE BUILDING OF THE ABBEY was started in the reign of Stephen, 1135-54, on land which was then in the parish of Bacton and had been given to the Cistercian monks in 1147 by Robert fitz Harold, Earl of Ferrers and Lord of Ewias, a grandson of William I.

The order had been founded at Citeaux in Burgundy in 1128. Its aims were simplicity and austerity which were best pursued in secluded places far away from the influence of the wealth of the towns in such sites as Fountains and Strata Florida, and their white habit reflected this simplicity and purity. Unlike most monastic orders learning was not important to them, manual labour as husbandmen being part of their rule.

In Great Britain at the time of the Dissolution they had eighty-six monasteries and thirty-three nunneries out of a total of about 3,600 such houses in Europe. In their building they attempted to achieve the same simplicity, their object being a 'healing and cleansing' architecture achieved by a 'purity and economy of line'.

The name 'Dore' according to Ekwall derives from the Welsh 'dour', meaning 'the waters' i.e. 'the stream'; thus Abbey Dore is 'the abbey by the stream'.

History

THE ABBEY FOUNDED in 1147 was dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary, the usual Cistercian dedication, and the building was presumably a temporary structure intended to serve the community until the skilled masons, of whom the monks usually had one or two among their number, could start work on a permanent building.

This they did, starting c.1180 and building a two-bay presbytery together with a crossing, transepts and transept chapels during the next twenty years and making a start on the nave and aisles. How far they got with these is difficult to tell because so little remains. This work still has some feeling of the last phases of Norman architecture in its transition to the Gothic.

The second phase from c. 1200 to c. 1260 saw the extension of the presbytery to the east by one bay, the addition of its ambulatory in the form of aisles and an east walk, the completion of the nave and aisles and the conventual buildings to the north of the church with the twelve-sided chapter house projecting to the east, all in the Early English Gothic. Having been completed, the abbey was consecrated by Bishop Thomas de Cantilupe in 1275. It was during this period that in 1216 King John gave to the abbey 'all the land between the River Dore and the rivulet called Trivelbrook', about 500 acres extending to Whitfield.

There had been a delay in the final completion of the work for in 1260 the bishop of Hereford, Peter de Aquablanca, sent out a letter granting twenty days indulgence to those contributing to the building of the church of Dore.

The last part of the abbey to be built was the tower, but there has been some difference of opinion as to when. There was some relaxation in the stricter rules of the Cistercians in the 15th Century and there are cases where towers were added at that time, but the documentary evidence of an agreement with David Addams of Ross, 15 April, 1633, certainly means that the present structure was built soon after that date and there is no sign of one having existed earlier.

The abbey was dissolved in 1536 when its yearly value was assessed at £101 5s. 2d. and its other possessions at 60s. The estate of the abbey was granted by the king to John Scudamore of Holme Lacy on 30 March, 1540. At the same time the rectory and tithes were granted to Henry Courtney, Earl of Devon, and passed through several hands before also being bought by John Scudamore, who was in receipt of a pension of 50s. per annum awarded by the Crown which he used to pay a priest-in-charge.

In 1633 a descendant, John Viscount Scudamore, who had been Ambassador to France, decided to restore part of the abbey as a place of worship, and it was at this time that the church was given its present appearance. A service of re-consecration was held on Palm Sunday, 22nd March, 1634.

From the time of the Dissolution until 1633 services had been held here and one incumbent, John Gyles, read the services from under an arch to keep his book from getting wet. It seems that the church and transepts had had a wooden roof which was in poor state, the original vaulting presumably having been destroyed at the time of the Reformation or used as a 'quarry' during the intervening century.

From 1895 to 1904 a comprehensive restoration was carried out under the direction of Roland W. Paul, who also during this same period excavated the site and discovered the foundations of the chapter house and much of the cloister and its surrounding buildings. His findings and a plan dated 1895 were published in volume 27 of the **Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucester Archaeological Society.** This plan was used by the Historic Monuments Commission in 1931 and again by D.H. Williams in 1976 in **White Monks in Gwent and the Border.**

The first Abbot, Adam I was recorded about 1180 and the last, John Redborn, was granted a pension of £13 per annum in 1536. Some old people remembered John Gyles, the rector, in 1633.

Exterior

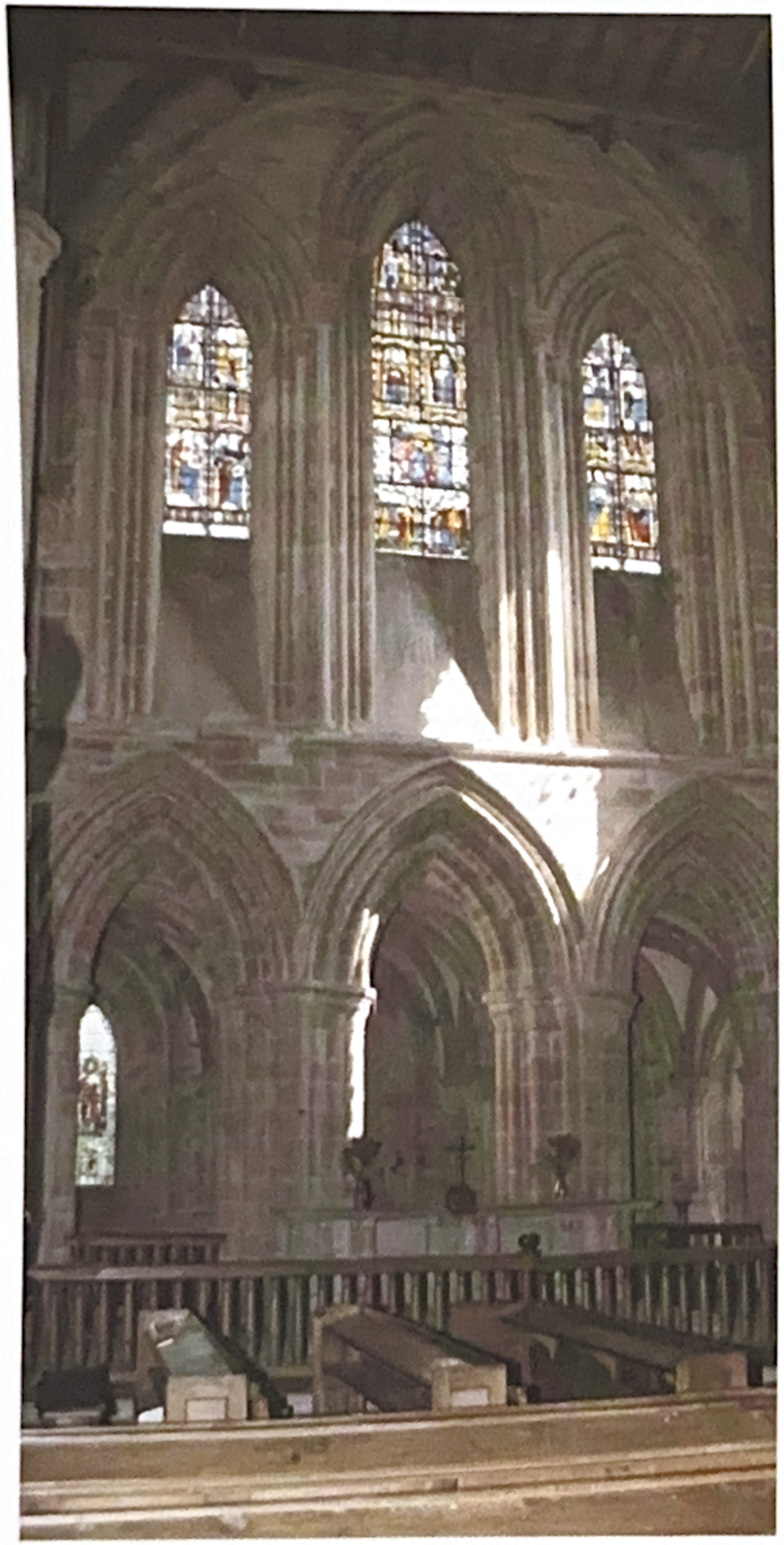
A WALK AROUND THE outside of the church shows something of its story and allows one to appreciate its peaceful situation in the Golden Valley.

The porch built on the south wall of the south transept is a typical Herefordshire timber-framed construction and is part of the 17th century conversion to a parish church. The barge-boards and the pendant at the apex are again standard features of timber-framing. It has a heavy stone roof, the tiles being of local stone. The long carpenters' assembly marks on the timbers are worth noting. These are features of timber-framed buildings and vary in length at different periods.

The flat buttress on the south-west corner of the transept is matched on the south-east by a stair turret with narrow windows, the two projections being linked by a 12th century roll moulding above the plinth. Between them are two tall lancet windows with heads of two orders, the inner chamfered and the outer moulded. The capitals are foliated and are continued as a string-course along the wall while below the windows is another string-course. In the middle of the wall above the windows is a vesica-shaped window with moulded and chamfered surrounds. There is a plain string-course at the foot of the gable and above it are two lancet windows lighting the roof space while at the gable apex is an old broken cross.

To the east of the main block of the transept is a lean-to containing the south-east chapel lit by a lancet window with again a smaller lancet lighting the roof space. There is a clasping buttress at the south-east corner and on the east wall another lancet as the east window of the chapel. This lean-to butts against the three-stage battlemented tower, which like the porch, is a 17th century addition. The relieving arch is clearly visible on the south face of the tower above the chapel roof.

The tower hides one bay of the presbytery which is of local red sandstone and has an ambulatory running round it forming a south aisle, an east walk or aisle and a north aisle. There are two big lancets above the lean-to roof of the south aisle and the aisle itself has four bays separated by shallow buttresses which have a roll-moulded string-course above the plinth; the two western bays are wider than those to the east. Each bay is lit by a lancet window, while above the buttresses is a moulded string-course with billet ornament which is carried above the arches of the windows. The east wall has five lancet windows again separated by



buttresses and the north wall is very similar to the south except that a two-centred doorway was inserted under the third window from the east in the mid 13th century. The door is battened with long 13th century hinges. Above the east walk is the east end of the presbytery with three graduated lancet windows with jambs of two chamfered orders. Above those in the gable are two blocked 17th century lancets, which must have lit the roof space.

From the north side evidence of the original roof of the south aisle of the presbytery can be seen on the tower. The north transept and its north-east chapel are similar to those on the south, but the chapel has neither buttresses nor a north window. In the gable there is only one lancet lighting the roof space and below it is a blocked square-headed doorway. Below the base of the gable there is still some plaster on the wall and evidence of the destroyed roofs of the dorter. The ashlar bonding stones and quoins at the north-west angle show it existed before the sacristy.

To the north of the transept is the roofless sacristy, once barrel-vaulted, the springing on the north still showing. In the east wall is a 17th century, semi-circular-headed doorway set in the opening of the earlier east window, while in the west wall is a recess, probably originally a doorway onto the cloisters with some alteration of the 17th century.

The present west wall of the church joining the west walls of the 12th century transepts was built in the 1630's, and to the west of it today are the remains of the nine bays of the choir and nave of the church destroyed after the Reformation. Reset in this wall is a 13th century lancet window.

The Nave and Choir

THESE WERE 137 FEET long by 52 feet, the actual nave being 28 feet the other 24 feet being the two aisles. They were originally of nine bays with the pulpitum between the second and third, making a choir of two bays, and the rood-screen in the fifth bay.

Today they remain as a series of overgrown low mounds, except for the eastern respond and first column of each arcade. The responds are semi-circular with moulded 'water-holding' bases, the northern having interlacing leaves on the capital, the southern water-leaf foliage. The columns are circular. That on the

north has a scalloped, foliated capital with a corbel on the north side which carried a rib of the north aisle vaulting, and a water-holding base. On the south side the two-centred, first arch of the arcade remains, having two moulded orders and a moulded label on the nave side.

Interior – The Presbytery

INSIDE THE WALLS ARE of limestone ashlar and some rubble. They are each of three bays of two-centred arches with three moulded orders towards the presbytery, and one to the ambulatory with a tall elaborately moulded lancet above each arch. The capitals have stiff-leaf decoration typical of the early 13th century and the bases are of the water-holding type with a slight hollow around the top which gives them this name.

Between the bays are the triple shafts going high up the wall from where they carried the former vaulting. This must have been a magnificent sight in the days before the Reformation of 1536, some of the colour from this period still being visible on one of the stiff-leafed corbels in the eastern angles carried on a plain, single shaft. These triple shafts interrupt the internal string-course above the arches of the two eastern bays. It is worth looking at the detail of some of the capitals and trying to picture the medieval craftsmen carving them.

The east wall has a three-bay arcade of two-centred arches of three moulded orders carried on piers with triple attached shafts supporting capitals some of which have the stiff-leaf carved foliage already mentioned. Above this arcade is a string-course which is continued round the two eastern bays of the presbytery. This acts as a base for the east windows, the three graduated lancets seen from outside with moulded rear arches again with the stiff-leafed capitals. Above these is a moulded wall-rib of pre-Reformation vaulting.

The ceiling of the presbytery is the work of John Abel in 1633-4. It is flat, of oak in three bays with mouldings and decoration typical of the Renaissance: foliage, scroll work, monsters and caryatids. The ceilings of the crossing and the transepts are similar, but not as elaborately carved. There are some attractive pierced pendants.

Not visible to the visitor are the heavy, plain trusses of double queen-post type above these ceilings. The 'King's Carpenter', as Abel was later to be called, certainly knew his timber and was a master craftsman in every sense.

The stone altar still has its five consecration crosses and has been reset on three drums of a column. The oak altar rails are part of the 17th century restoration and have turned balusters with a gate in the middle flanked by posts each with a ball on top. North and South of the altar are a number of reset medieval tiles, many of them bearing coats of arms. Also inside the altar rails is an early 17th century oak chair with an arcaded back with a scroll on the top rail and turned front legs supporting curved arms.

The glass in the east windows is all of the 17th century, the principal subjects being the Ascension in the centre, Sts. Matthew, Mark, Peter and Andrew in the north and Sts. Luke, John the Evangelist and James and John in the south with the date 1634.

Also in the presbytery is a mid 17th century hexagonal, oak pulpit with Doric columns, an arabesque frieze, a dentilled cornice, all very much Renaissance in style, and a heavy sounding board supported on a panelled standard matching the panels on the pulpit. The pendants, turned finials and cresting on the board are well worth a second glance.

High up on each side of the wall between the first and second bays is a staple probably for suspending the lenten veil, a rare survival.

Screen

THIS IS A VERY FINE piece of Renaissance woodwork, almost certainly the work of John Abel, 1577-64. Surviving works which are

definitely his are the ceiling here at Abbey Dore, the market hall at Leominster (1633), now known as the Grange, Lady Hawkins Grammar School at Kington (1625) and the early market hall there (1654). He received the title of the 'King's Carpenter' when he constructed a powder mill in Hereford in 1645.

It is of five bays divided by Ionic columns, and in each of the four closed bays are four panels in the lower part with three turned balusters above, with trefoiled cusping between the heads, except in the second bay from the north, which has two pendants and only one baluster. On the frieze facing west is the inscription 'Vive deo gratus toti mundo tumulatus crimine mundatus semper transire paratus' - 'Live in a way pleasing to God entirely buried as regards the world free from reproach always ready to pass from hence', which is identical to the first part of the inscription on the Grange at Leominster. Above the main cornice are four pierced pinnacles separated by the coats of arms of the crown (Stuart), Scudamore, and the see of Canterbury impaling Laud.

Ambulatory

THIS TAKES THE FORM of a lean-to round the presbytery making in effect south and north aisles and an east walk.

The last is of five bays and is two bays in width with quadripartite vaulting in each bay with moulded ribs supported by four piers each of eight round shafts with stiff-leaf capitals and water-holding bases. The bases of the three east shafts in each pier are raised to stand on the ends of the cross walls which formerly divided the five chapels. The east window of each of these chapels has a roll moulding at the angle of the splay and is set in a splay with moulded jambs and a two-centred arch. The windows in the north and south walls are similar, but not in a recess. A single vaulting shaft with

acanthus-leaf capitals remains in each main angle. Two 13th century coffin lids lie in this east walk, though one of them has later dates on it. A coffin of the same age is in the south aisle.

The north and south aisles are each of three bays just like those in the east walk. The western bay in each is loftier with a foliated boss in the north aisle, while in the eastern bay of the same aisle is a doorway with moulded jambs and a two-centred head, which seems to have been inserted soon after the aisles were built.

The roof over the aisles and east walk is a simple pentice type with plain tie-beams and struts to the principals and purlins. In the south window in the east wall of the ambulatory are the arms of the Carwarden family of early 17th century glass and in the west window of the south aisle is some early, plain, worn glass.

In the north wall of the east walk are the remains of a mid 13th century locker with grooves for shelves. There is a smaller locker, but of a date some 200 years later, in the east bay of the south aisle, and in the next bay is another of about the same date with a four-centred rebated head.

The Crossing

ON EACH OF ITS four sides are high, two-centred arches of two orders, both chamfered on the outer faces, but with the outer order on the inner face moulded except in the western arch where the outer order on both faces is moulded.

Against the west wall is a three-bay gallery on four circular oak columns. The front is of moulded panelling divided by square posts each surmounted by a ball. The columns have moulded octagonal bases and support a carved beam above which is the actual gallery, which is entered from the south by a staircase with a moulded string and handrail and turned balusters.

Transepts

THESE WITH THEIR CHAPELS and the crossing are the earliest remaining parts of the building and are of late 12th century construction.

The north transept is of two bays divided by triple-shafted responds of which the central shaft is keeled, i.e. the circular section is drawn out like a ship's keel. These responds carry the ribs of the former vaulting. In the east wall are two

two-centred arches with three large rolls and a form of dog-tooth ornament, springing from semi-octagonal responds with stiff-leafed capitals. Above there is a moulded string-course on east and west walls below a clerestory with two lancet windows in each wall with chamfered jambs and moulded splays and rear arches, the north-west window being longer and wider than the others.

The chapel to the east of the north bay of the transept has a quadripartite vault with ribs of twin-roll section carried on corbels carved with foliage. There is a single round-headed window in the east wall with chamfered jambs and moulded splays.

At the east end of the north wall is a doorway with chamfered jambs and a semi-circular head, and at the west end at first-floor level is a blocked doorway which was the former entrance to the night stair.

In the west wall of the south bay is the blocked entrance to the former north aisle.

The south transept is similar to the north but its north-east window is blocked by the 17th century tower, and its south wall has at its western end the external doorway already mentioned, with a rounded inner order and a moulded outer carried on shafts with foliated capitals. In the south-east corner is a round-headed doorway to the stair turret.

The font is octagonal, probably 17th century in date, but it could be earlier, on a plain stem set on a modern base which has re-used medieval tiles inside the stone curb.

The south-east chapel has a lancet in each of the east and south walls with chamfered jambs and moulded splays and there is a carved rosette in the centre of the moulded vaulting.

The Tower

THE CONTRACT WITH DAVID Addams of Ross, mason, was for a tower to be built 80 feet to the roof, battlements to go 4 feet higher, to be 16 feet square internally, 24 feet externally, but the walls of the first stage were to be 5 feet thick. He was to be paid £90 for it, £5 weekly and the balance to be paid within one week of finishing.

Cloisters and Chapter House

THESE ARE TO THE north of the church and no longer in the churchyard. Above ground there is no evidence of the cloisters, but excavation showed them to occupy the full length of the nave and choir with a frater along the west walk projecting beyond the west end of the church.

The chapter house was twelve-sided and about 44 feet in diameter. The only other twelve-sided chapter house in Britain is that at Margam in Glamorgan. There is some evidence of a triple vaulting shaft on the south, i.e. the north face of the north wall of the sacristy.

Photographs: Dyson & Co. (Abergavenny) Ltd
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